

# TURNING DEMOCRACY INTO Development

As sister disciplines, politics and economics contribute to the well-being of any society. A Lebanese legal expert explores the relationship between the two and describes how politics might be used as a springboard to economic health.

by Wassim Harb

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) are launching a new initiative—entitled “Good Public Governance for Development in the Middle East and North Africa”—that aims to promote economic growth by stemming corruption and improving good governance in the Middle East. In particular, it will support the efforts of Arab leaders to use good governance—i.e., enhanced transparency, accountability and rule of law—to generate sustainable human development.

The complicated relationship between democracy and economic and social development has not yet been fully explored. For example, is democracy a necessary lever for socioeconomic development or will development occur regardless of the government in place? In turn, how does improved development impact democratic consolidation? Is democracy itself an objective or a means? Though these questions remain, it is clear that democracies with transparent, accountable governments that support the rule of law spur development. Recent studies have revealed that improving governmental accountability and the rule of law are critical for stimulating the drivers of development: entrepreneurship, job creation and the flow of international investment capital. Thus, a development program should begin with these reforms.

Democracy aids development in at least two important ways. First, as citizens participate actively in democratic life and have access to information about government policies, they can hold their government accountable for achieving development goals. An accountable government is more likely to stay the course in pursuit of these goals. Second, businesses that work with governments to develop and use public resources demand a transparent environment regulated by the rule of law.

The countries of the Middle East possess well-conceived constitutions that, for the

most part, lay solid groundwork for good governance. They protect essential rights and liberties and enshrine the separation of powers, including the independence of the judiciary. However, the theory and practice of the law do not always overlap in the region. The practice of not following the national constitution began under the British and French Mandates and continues today under several Arab leaders. While there is some transparency and accountability in the Middle East, it tends to rest at the bottom of the chain of command rather than the top. The existence of single-party governments in many Arab countries tends to exacerbate this lack of transparency and increase corruption. Weak Arab civil society also diminishes the demand for government transparency and accountability.

## “Is democracy itself an objective or a means?”

If Arab states have not been working relentlessly to adopt practices of good governance, some have at least been exerting themselves to reform and modernize their public institutions using the resources at their disposal. Despite various obstacles (most notably the ongoing Arab-Israeli conflict) and crises throughout the region, some Arab countries have even achieved a measure of success. However, the majority of countries face serious and endemic problems that hinder their economic, social and educational progress. The 2002 UNDP Arab Human Development Report indicated a general stagnation of development, due in particular to the impact of fluctuating oil prices. In addition, Arab economies do not perform well when it comes to savings, investment and productivity. Given this situation, the UNDP and the OECD have decided to launch a project to address these deficits.


Focusing on the interrelated topics of administration, finance and the judiciary, the UNDP/OECD initiative will take a comprehensive regional approach to analyze six themes, each led by an Arab country:



The trading board at Kuwait's stock exchange

- Civil Service and Integrity – Morocco
- e-Government, Administrative Simplification and Regulatory Reform – UAE
- Governance of Public Finance – Egypt
- Public Service Delivery – Tunisia
- Role of the Judiciary and Enforcement – Jordan
- Civil Society and Media – Lebanon.

The initiative's overall goal is to create a vision for administrative reform that will improve economic development and the standard of living in the Arab world. In order to fully understand the problems facing Arab governments, the initiative will undertake a study of government service delivery that will identify obstacles to reform and development. It will also conduct research to identify gridlocks and methods to avoid them. Moving to solutions, the initiative will implement prototype reform projects in order to troubleshoot any difficulties with implementation and to develop concrete evidence of the benefits of such reform.

To create governments that could use the region's sizeable material and human resources in an accountable and transparent way—the definition of “good” governance—would enhance the economic and social development of the region and improve the quality of life of its citizens. Conversely, improvement in the quality of life of people in the Middle East and North Africa provides the surest basis for creating an environment in which human rights are protected and democracy can flourish. The UNDP/OECD initiative takes the first steps toward making this vision of reform a reality. 

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